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SECURITY DILEMMA: KASHMIR CANNOT BE SEEN THROUGH ONE SINGLE FRAME

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# KASHMIR CENTRAL

# THE COMPLEX COMBINATION

## of local and external factors

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expose
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RESTORE
ORDER
MAKE A SPLASH
INCULCATE
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT
KASHMIR CENTRAL

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# THE PRICE OF SELLING PARADISE

There is a peculiar danger in becoming successful at selling what was once taken for granted. Kashmir's tourism economy is expanding, and that expansion is welcome. More visitors mean more business for hotels, transporters, guides, restaurants, artisans and thousands of families whose livelihoods depend directly or indirectly on tourism. Yet somewhere between accommodating more visitors and building more facilities for them, Kashmir risks losing sight of what those visitors actually come to experience.

A mountain is not a hotel room with a mountain behind it. A meadow is not an empty plot awaiting construction. A lake is not waterfront real estate. A forest road is not an invitation to build along its edges.

Yet in some of Kashmir's most popular destinations, concrete is becoming the default language of development. Buildings are rising along roads and slopes, natural drainage is being altered, traffic is increasing and the boundaries between a settlement and a tourist destination are steadily disappearing.

The irony is difficult to miss: we are building Kashmir in order to attract people to the Kashmir that the building itself is gradually erasing. Tourism statistics usually measure arrivals, occupancy, revenue and investment. They rarely calculate the other balance sheet—the pressure placed on water, forests, waste systems, roads, rivers and fragile mountain slopes by every additional visitor and every additional structure.

A destination can become commercially successful while becoming ecologically poorer.

The issue is not whether Kashmir should develop. It must. Better hotels, roads, sanitation and visitor facilities are necessary for a modern tourism economy. The question is whether development is being planned according to the capacity of the landscape or whether the landscape is simply being asked to absorb whatever development demands of it.

That distinction will determine whether today's tourism boom becomes a durable industry or an accelerated consumption of Kashmir's natural capital.

The economic argument for conservation is equally compelling. Kashmir's greatest tourism asset cannot be manufactured or imported. A forest destroyed today may take decades to recover. A polluted lake cannot be restored by adding hotel rooms. A destabilized mountain slope does not distinguish between public infrastructure and private construction. Natural beauty is therefore not merely scenery.

And unlike financial capital, it loses value through misuse. Kashmir may eventually have to choose between more tourism and better tourism. The two are not necessarily synonymous. A destination overwhelmed by construction, congestion, waste and water stress may generate impressive numbers today while steadily reducing its appeal tomorrow. The answer is not to shut Kashmir's doors. It is to decide, before the landscape decides for us, where development belongs and where it does not. The measure of successful tourism will not be how many visitors Kashmir accommodates in one season. It will be whether the same mountains, lakes and meadows can welcome visitors twenty years from now without us having to explain what we built in their place. The mountains will remain. The question is what we leave standing around them.

**Bashir Assad**

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# IS THE CALM HOLDING?

## Kashmir after Anantnag and Kulgam

*by* **Bashir Assad**

For much of the period following the Pahalgam attack, the most striking feature of Kashmir's security landscape was the relative absence of major attacks.

That did not mean the threat had gone away. The Valley remained heavily guarded, intelligence operations continued and security agencies maintained a close watch over areas that had, at different points, been active theatres of militancy. But there was a noticeable difference between the Kashmir of recent years and the Kashmir of the past: violence had become less frequent, less organised and, in most places, far removed from the routines of ordinary life.

The attacks in Anantnag and Kulgam have disturbed that picture.

On July 22, Head Constable Ashiq Hussain Qureshi of the Jammu and Kashmir Police was killed in Anantnag while deployed for security arrangements connected with the Amarnath Yatra. Nine days later, two migrant workers from Chhattisgarh were attacked at a brick kiln in Kulgam. One of them died at the site and the other later succumbed to his injuries. Neither incident, taken by itself, is evidence of a revival of the insurgency that once consumed large parts of the Valley. But together they are a reminder that the problem has not disappeared; it has changed shape. The distinction is important.

**There are more layers of surveillance, better communications, stronger intelligence capabilities and a much greater ability to respond quickly when something goes wrong.**

Kashmir today has a far denser security network than it did during the worst years of militancy. There are more layers of surveillance, better communications, stronger intelligence capabilities and a much greater ability to respond quickly when something goes wrong. The political and economic environment has changed as well.

However, none of these measures makes a determined attacker incapable of finding a gap. That may be the most useful way of looking at the latest incidents.

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF VULNERABILITY

The old image of militancy in Kashmir was built around numbers and territory: armed groups moving in large numbers, attacks on security installations, prolonged encounters and areas where the writ of the state was visibly contested. That is not the picture today. A small group, or even a single individual, can remain hidden for a considerable period and require very little infrastructure to carry out an attack. The objective need not be to hold ground or engage security forces in a prolonged confrontation. It may simply be to identify a vulnerable target, strike quickly and disappear. This is considerably harder to prevent.

A security force can dominate a road, guard a sensitive installation or conduct searches across an area. It cannot, however, know in advance which individual may have decided to attack a policeman, where that person will appear or what information he may have gathered before doing so. The killing in Anantnag illustrates that difficulty.

The policeman was on duty in an area where security arrangements had already been strengthened because of the Amarnath pilgrimage. The attack therefore does not necessarily point to a failure of the entire security apparatus. What it does show is that even a substantial security presence cannot close every small opening available to someone working clandestinely.

That is the nature of the problem now facing Kashmir. It is less about controlling territory than about denying an attacker the opportunity to exploit a moment.

## THE RESPONSE AFTER ANANTNAG

The response after an attack also exposes one of the less discussed difficulties of Kashmir's counter-insurgency apparatus. The Jammu and Kashmir Police remains a crucial part of the security grid and, after every militant incident, is under considerable pressure to produce a lead quickly. Its investigators and intelligence personnel work to reconstruct the attack, identify the perpetrators and trace the local network that may have provided them with shelter, movement, communications or other assistance. But the police do not always have the technological resources, intelligence depth or surveillance capabilities available to larger central agencies. In that environment, the first response can sometimes become necessarily broad. People with earlier police records, previous cases or known associations may be called in for questioning or subjected to renewed scrutiny, particularly when investigators are working against time and with incomplete information.

**The Jammu and Kashmir Police remains a crucial part of the security grid and, after every militant incident, is under considerable pressure to produce a lead quickly.**

Some of these measures may yield useful leads; others can become deeply contested, especially when a

person's past record is treated as an indication of present involvement without sufficient evidence. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that a section of Kashmir's population already lives with a heightened sense of vulnerability and suspicion. A large crackdown may therefore serve an immediate investigative purpose while simultaneously producing another, less visible cost: resentment, insecurity and a further weakening of the trust that the police need if they are to obtain reliable information from the community. The challenge for the security establishment is consequently not simply to act quickly after an attack, but to become increasingly precise in whom it investigates, why it investigates them and how it distinguishes an actual support network from people whose connection to militancy belongs only to their past. It is  where counter-insurgency becomes complicated. The security agencies need information quickly. The danger is that, in the immediate aftermath of an attack, the distinction between an actual support network and the wider population can become blurred. That distinction has long-term consequences.

Kashmir's security apparatus ultimately depends upon information from the people among whom it operates. If residents believe that providing information will bring them greater security, cooperation becomes possible. If they believe that security measures are likely to bring indiscriminate suspicion, cooperation becomes much more difficult. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to be tough. It is to be accurate.

## WHY KULGAM MATTERS MORE THAN IT MAY FIRST APPEAR

The Kulgam attack raises a somewhat different concern. The victims were migrant workers, part of a population

that has become an increasingly visible component of Kashmir's economy. Workers from outside Jammu and Kashmir are employed in construction, agriculture, brick kilns, hospitality and numerous other sectors. They are also among the more exposed sections of the population.

Many live at their workplaces or in temporary accommodation. Their movements are often determined by employment rather than by security considerations. They may have little knowledge of local geography and few links to the communities in which they work. An attack against such workers therefore creates a particular kind of uncertainty.

The immediate victims are obvious, but the consequences can travel much further. Workers may leave. Others may hesitate before coming to Kashmir. Contractors may become more cautious. Families elsewhere may begin to view Kashmir as a less secure place for their relatives to work. There is an economic dimension to this that should not be overlooked.

Kashmir's return to a more active tourist and service economy has depended not only on visitors but also on the movement of labour. Construction projects, hotels, restaurants, farms and small businesses all require workers. A militant group does not need to stop the economy. Creating enough fear to slow it down can be sufficient.

This appears to be one reason the authorities have moved to review security arrangements around migrant workers following the Kulgam incident, including greater surveillance, patrolling

and consideration of safer accommodation arrangements.

There is, however, an uncomfortable irony here. The more heavily a section of the workforce has to be protected, the wider perception of vulnerability can grow. The objective of security should eventually be to make such extraordinary arrangements unnecessary.

## SOUTH KASHMIR'S OLD GEOGRAPHY

There is also a geographical reason why the two incidents deserve attention.

Anantnag and Kulgam sit within a part of South Kashmir that has historically been important to militant organizations. The region contains a mixture of densely populated settlements, agricultural areas, transport routes and access towards forested and mountainous terrain. None of this means that South Kashmir is once again becoming a militant stronghold. It would be a mistake to make that leap.

But geography does not stop mattering simply because the nature of militancy changes. An area with a history of militant activity may retain old networks, social connections and knowledge of the terrain long after the larger organizations that once operated there have been weakened.

This is one reason security agencies tend to respond particularly quickly to signs of renewed activity in the south. The concern is not that one attack automatically leads to another. It is that an isolated attack may provide an opportunity for a dormant network to test itself. Can it obtain weapons? Can it move people without detection? Can it find local assistance? Can it identify another target? Can it carry out a second operation before the security forces understand the structure behind the first? The answers to those questions will tell us considerably more about the state of militancy than the casualty figures from any single incident.

## FROM INSURGENCY TO DISRUPTION

The character of the threat has changed sufficiently that the word "insurgency" itself can sometimes be misleading. An insurgency suggests organization, recruitment, territorial influence and a sustained attempt to challenge the state. The more plausible danger in Kashmir today may be something smaller: a network that survives by remaining difficult to see and seeks to create disruption whenever an opportunity presents itself. That strategy does not require hundreds of armed men. It requires patience. A policeman killed in a market sends one message. A migrant worker attacked at a workplace sends another. An incident around a pilgrimage route affects the confidence of visitors. An attack involving tourists can have consequences far beyond the immediate location. The physical damage may therefore be limited while the psychological and economic effect is much greater. This is particularly relevant in Kashmir because the perception of safety has itself become economically valuable.

**Many live at their workplaces or in temporary accommodation. Their movements are often determined by employment rather than by security considerations.**

The Valley's tourism revival has been one of the clearest symbols of the return of normal life. Hotels, transport operators, guides, shopkeepers, houseboat owners and thousands of other people have a direct interest in maintaining that perception. An attack does not have to shut down tourism completely to cause damage. It only has to make people hesitate. So the terrorism has transitioned from "Insurgency" to "Disruption".

## THE INTELLIGENCE PROBLEM

Much of the discussion after an attack tends to focus on the security forces seen on the ground:

checkpoints, cordons, searches and additional deployments. Those measures are necessary, but they are not where the most decisive part of the battle is fought. The crucial information is usually obtained before the gun is fired. Who has entered the area? Who has been in contact with whom? Who has suddenly changed his movements? Who has access to weapons? Who knows the routine of the intended target? Who is providing accommodation or transport? And perhaps most importantly, who is willing to speak to the authorities before something happens?

Technology has transformed surveillance in Kashmir, but technology cannot replace local knowledge. Cameras can record movement. Digital systems can identify patterns. Drones can watch difficult terrain. None of them can fully substitute for a resident who notices something unusual and trusts the system enough to report it.

***This is why public confidence should be regarded as part of the security infrastructure, rather than as a separate political concern.***

## HOW FAR CAN THE RESPONSE GO?

The difficult balance is visible in the aftermath of the recent attacks. There is an understandable demand for a strong response whenever a policeman or civilian is killed. The public expects the perpetrators to be found and the networks behind them dismantled. At the same time, security operations that are too broad or insufficiently discriminating can create a different problem.

After the Anantnag killing, the authorities intensified searches and reportedly demolished the homes of two suspected militants. Such measures are defended by the security establishment as part of deterrence and counter-terrorism. Critics see them as collective punishment. There is a wider issue beneath that argument.

***The success of counter-insurgency cannot be measured solely by the number of suspects detained or properties destroyed. It must also be judged by whether the wider population remains willing to cooperate with the state. A resident who trusts the police may pass on information. A resident who fears the police may remain silent. That difference can determine whether the next attack is prevented.***

**After the Anantnag killing, the authorities intensified searches and reportedly demolished the homes of two suspected militants.**

## WHAT SHOULD WE WATCH NOW?

It is tempting to ask whether another attack is likely. That is not a question anyone can answer responsibly. A more useful exercise is to watch for changes in the pattern. If attacks remain isolated and security agencies succeed in identifying the people and support structures involved, the recent incidents may prove to have been contained episodes. If attacks begin appearing at shorter intervals, the assessment would have to change.

Geographical spread would be another warning sign. A cluster of incidents in South Kashmir would be serious; simultaneous activity across several districts would suggest something more organized. The choice of targets would matter too. The more consequential question is what the attackers might try to do next if they have succeeded in demonstrating that they can still operate inside a heavily secured environment. One possibility, and one that security agencies would have to take seriously, is an attempt to move beyond relatively soft or isolated targets and strike something whose significance extends well beyond the immediate casualties.

That could take several forms. An attack on an important security installation would obviously carry a different message from the killing of an isolated policeman. An attempt to disrupt a major infrastructure project, a strategic road or transport link, a power installation or another high-visibility development project could

have consequences that reach into the political and economic narrative surrounding Jammu and Kashmir. A successful attack on a prominent project would not merely cause physical damage; it could be intended to question the state's ability to secure the infrastructure on which its larger development and integration narrative rests.

***The geography of such an attempt is also difficult to predict. It need not necessarily remain confined to South Kashmir. The attackers could look towards the north, central Kashmir or areas south of the Pir Panjal, depending on where they perceive an opportunity. Moving outside the traditional areas of concentration would itself serve a purpose: it would compel the security establishment to stretch its resources across a much wider geography and create the impression that there is no clearly defined safe zone.***

There is, however, an important distinction between a plausible threat and a forecast. There is no basis at present to say that a particular project or location will be targeted. What can be assessed is the logic behind target selection. If a small militant network wants to compensate for its limited manpower, it will look for targets capable of producing an effect much larger than the attack itself. The target's symbolic value may therefore become as important as its tactical value.

An attack on migrant workers would generate fear among a vulnerable workforce. An attack on tourists or pilgrims could immediately affect perceptions of Kashmir's safety and carry an economic cost. An attack on security personnel would demonstrate that the security grid can still be penetrated. But an attack on a strategically important installation or a high-profile development project could potentially combine all three effects with something more: a political message.

**If a small militant network wants to compensate for its limited manpower, it will look for targets capable of producing an effect much larger than the attack itself.**

That is where the security assessment becomes more serious. ***The question would no longer be simply whether militants can still kill. It would be whether they retain the organizational ability to select, plan and execute an operation designed to produce consequences beyond the immediate site of the attack.***

If such an attack were to occur, its implications could extend beyond Jammu and Kashmir. Depending on the target and circumstances, it could influence the political debate in New Delhi, affect investor and public confidence, disrupt a major development Programme and, in certain circumstances, acquire a diplomatic dimension as well. An incident involving a strategically sensitive project or location could quickly become part of the larger India-Pakistan narrative, particularly if there were evidence pointing towards cross-border direction or support.

This is why the next phase deserves close attention. Isolated attacks can be the work of a small surviving network. A complex attack against a strategically valuable target requires something more: reconnaissance, logistics, intelligence about the target, coordination and the ability to move people and material without detection. If militants demonstrate that capability, the assessment of the security situation would have to change significantly.

For now, it would be premature to assume that such an operation is imminent. But it would also be unwise for the security establishment to measure the threat only by the scale of the attacks that have already taken place. A weakened network does not necessarily remain a predictable network. Sometimes the most revealing indication of its remaining capability is not how often it strikes, but the kind of target it chooses when it decides that the time is right. Recruitment would be perhaps the most important indicator of all. A

militant network that can replace its losses is a different proposition from one surviving on a shrinking number of operatives. So is a network that can establish new local support. ***The coming months should therefore be judged less by the rhetoric surrounding individual incidents and more by whether militants are able to establish a pattern.***

## SECURITY AND POLITICS CANNOT BE SEPARATED

There is also a political context to all this. Kashmir is not dealing with security questions in isolation. Discussions over statehood, representative government, economic development and the relationship between Srinagar and New Delhi continue alongside them. Every fresh attack changes the political atmosphere, even if only temporarily.

Security once again becomes the dominant subject. The administration is pushed towards a harder response. Political parties are forced to take positions. Ordinary residents who had begun thinking about employment, tourism or education are reminded that the possibility of violence has not completely disappeared. That is one of the reasons small attacks can have an influence well beyond their immediate scale. Militant groups may no longer have the capacity to dictate the political agenda in Kashmir, but they can still interrupt it. Preventing that interruption is therefore not only a matter of policing. It is part of preserving the space in which political and economic normalization can continue.

## THE TEST OF NORMALCY

There is perhaps too much emphasis on the word "normalcy" in discussions about Kashmir. Normalcy is often treated as though it were a condition that, once achieved, cannot be lost. In reality, it is more fragile. A reasonable expectation is that the risk is low and that the state can respond when something goes wrong. That expectation is what recent attacks have tested. The answer will not come from another press conference or another deployment alone. It will come from what happens afterwards.

**The challenge for the security establishment is to ensure that those moments do not become opportunities for rebuilding. That requires more than numbers.**

If the networks responsible are dismantled, if no sustained series of attacks follows, if migrant workers continue to come and work, if pilgrims continue to travel and if tourists continue to regard Kashmir as a place they can visit without unusual fear, then the basic security environment will have held. If attacks begin to multiply, the calculation changes.

## THE CALM, FOR NOW

There is no compelling evidence at present to suggest that Kashmir has returned to the insurgency of an earlier era. The scale, organization and reach of militancy today are fundamentally different. But the opposite conclusion would be equally complacent.

The Anantnag and Kulgam incidents show that even a weakened militant ecosystem can retain the ability to exploit moments of vulnerability. The challenge for the security establishment is to ensure that those moments do not become opportunities for rebuilding. That requires more than numbers. It requires intelligence good enough to find a network before it acts; policing capable of working with local communities; security arrangements that protect vulnerable workers and visitors without making ordinary life feel permanently militarized; and a response that is firm without becoming indiscriminate.

There is, finally, a question that lies beyond the immediate security picture in the Valley: **does Pakistan currently have the political, economic and strategic space to raise the level of its engagement in Kashmir?** Pakistan's own economic difficulties, political uncertainties and security pressures have imposed constraints on the state in recent years. At the same time, the relationship between its civilian and military establishments, its internal political calculations and the wider regional environment remain important variables. Whether these circumstances limit Islamabad's ability to support or facilitate a renewed escalation across the Line of Control or whether, at some point, developments within Pakistan create an incentive to raise the temperature in Kashmir remains to be seen. For India, that uncertainty is itself a reason not to treat the present lull as a permanent settlement of the security problem.

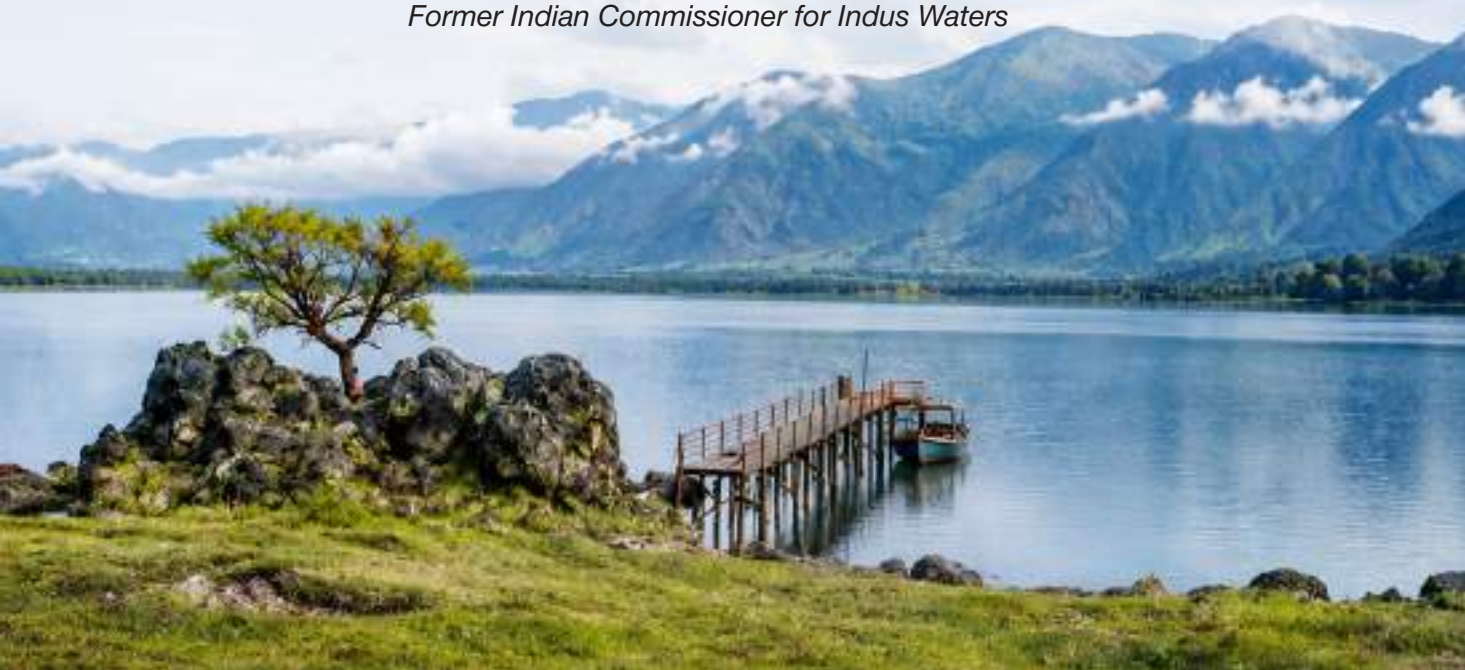
For now, the evidence points towards a militant threat that is smaller, more fragmented and less capable than it was in the past, but still capable of producing disproportionate consequences. The immediate task is to prevent isolated successes from becoming a pattern. Whether the threat remains contained, or acquires a new degree of organization and external support, will depend not only on what happens inside Kashmir but also on how the wider India-Pakistan strategic environment evolves.

# TULBUL NAVIGATION PROJECT

## Four Decades of Deadlock and Kashmir's Stunted Water Economy

*by* **Pradeep Kumar Saxena**

*Former Indian Commissioner for Indus Waters*



## PART I: A PROJECT FROZEN IN TIME

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

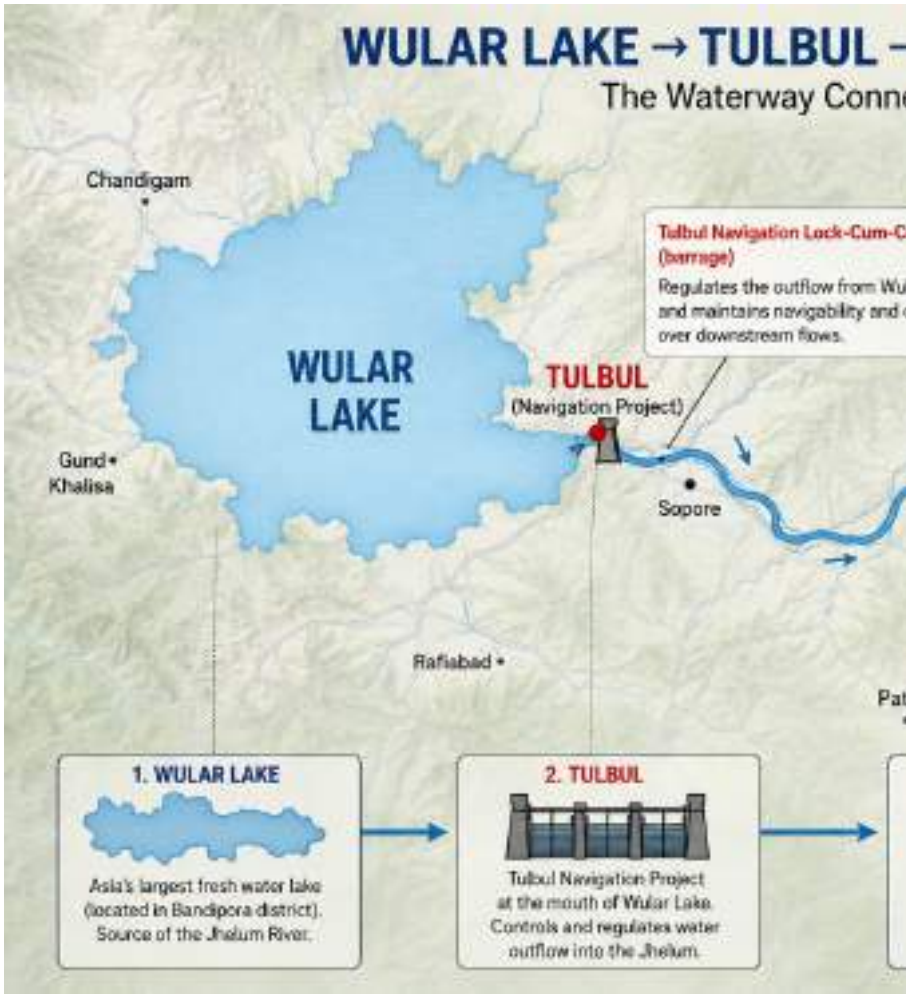
A partially built structure at the outlet of Wular Lake in north Kashmir has stood frozen since 1987, which is a mute testimony to the decades of restraint India exercised in the name of goodwill and friendship vis-a-vis Pak. The Tulbul Navigation Project, a modest navigation lock on the Jhelum at the lake's outfall, was suspended when India halted construction in good faith following Pakistan's objection. Fourteen rounds of bilateral talks produced no resolution; Pakistan consistently chose obstruction over agreement. This article, in two parts, exposes four decades of willful deadlock engineered by Pakistan through the systematic misuse of the Indus Waters Treaty and its enduring cost to Kashmir's economy, waterways, and livelihoods. The costs fall entirely on Kashmir: collapsed navigation, degraded fisheries, and stunted tourism.

### BACKGROUND

For four decades, a partially completed structure has stood at the outlet of Wular Lake in north Kashmir: a monument, unfortunately, not to engineering ambition but to the costs of excessive accommodation. The Tulbul Navigation Project has become an enduring symbol of how the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960 has been weaponised by Pakistan to hamper development that touches the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris.

### THE JHELUM RIVER

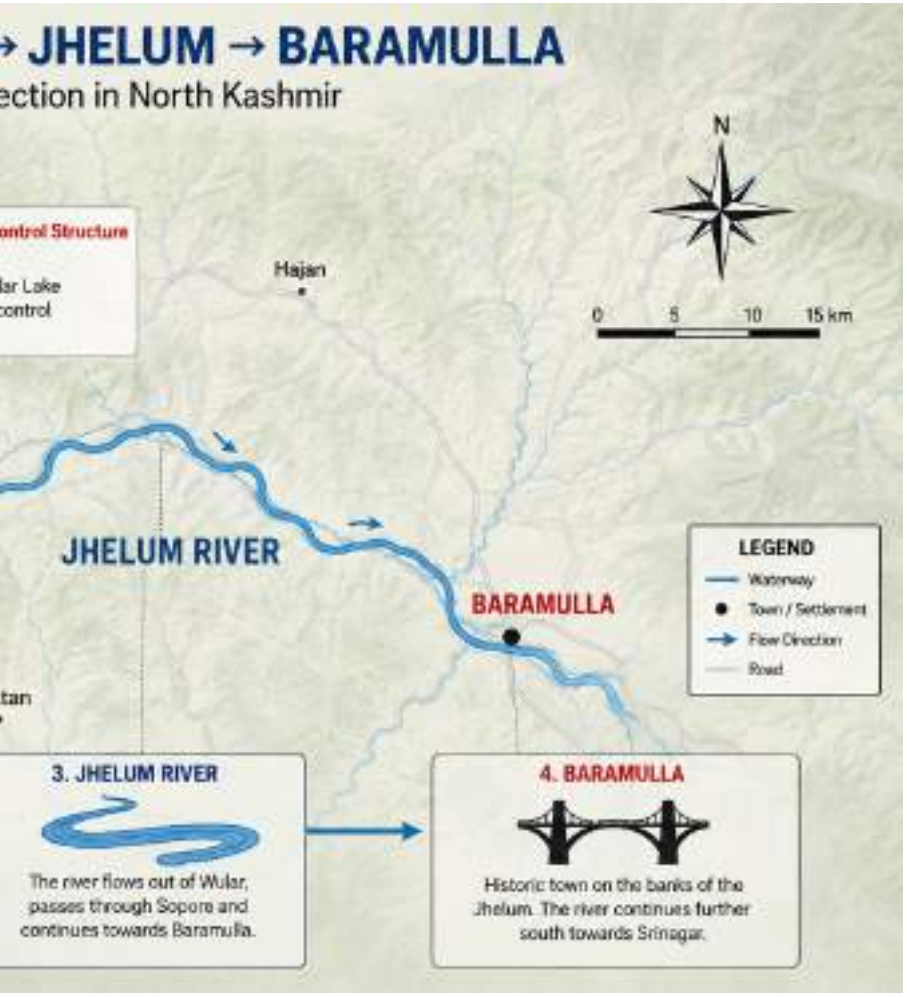
The Jhelum is the Kashmir Valley's sole natural waterway with viable inland navigation potential. Rising from a spring at Verinag on the valley's southeastern rim, it flows through Khanabal, Anantnag, and Srinagar before emptying into Wular Lake at Baniyari. The lake receives inflows from several streams but drains through a single outlet at Ningli, from where an outfall channel continues to Baramulla. The gentle gradient over this 170 kms stretch between Khanabal and Baramulla has historically made it well suited for navigation.




**Before Independence, roughly 70% of the valley's cargo moved by river aboard large wooden boats called 'khachus', each carrying up to 15 tonnes.**

These waterways have long served as Kashmir's commercial lifelines. Before Independence, roughly 70% of the valley's cargo moved by river aboard large wooden boats called 'khachus', each carrying up to 15 tonnes. As Kashmir's horticulture sector boomed after Independence, especially around Sopore, freight volumes grew sharply, and mechanised river transport gradually replaced the oar-driven 'khachus'.

Wular Lake once guaranteed year-round navigability through sustained winter discharge. That changed in the 1960s when, to reduce flooding in Sopore, authorities dredged 20 kilometres of the river channel between Ningli and Baramulla. The intervention achieved its objective, providing much needed relief to the people of Sopore, but produced an



unintended consequence: the lake began draining prematurely each winter, cutting discharge to levels too shallow for commercial boats between October and February. Year-round navigation was effectively lost.

## A PROJECT PAUSED MID-CONSTRUCTION

The Tulbul Project was conceived only to restore what had been lost through dredging. A navigation lock and flow-regulation structure at the Wular Lake outfall on the Ningli channel would ensure navigable depth across the critical 20-km stretch to Baramulla throughout the year. Beyond restoring navigation, the project promised flood moderation during the monsoon, reduced road congestion, and a measurable cut in truck emissions along the Jhelum corridor.

India began construction in 1984. Pakistan objected almost immediately, characterising the structure as a "storage work" on the Jhelum, a Western River over which the IWT grants Pakistan dominant allocation rights. India maintained, with considerable technical justification, that the project was neither a dam nor a reservoir but a navigation lock impounding a negligible quantum of water well within permissible limits. Six meetings of the Permanent Indus Commission between May 1986 and July 1987 yielded no agreement.

Pakistan's objections were purely theoretical and in clear conflict with the fundamental object and purpose of the Treaty, i.e. to attain *"the most complete and satisfactory utilization of the waters of the Indus system."* The Pakistani position, taken to its logical conclusion, would mandate the rapid depletion of Wular Lake without benefit to any stakeholder while imposing lasting navigational harm on the Jhelum. This destructive approach militates against basic common sense and rationality, as well as universally accepted principles of sound water resource management.

What followed is among the longest diplomatic standoffs in the Treaty's history. When Commission-level talks failed, the matter was escalated to Secretary level. At Pakistan's insistence, and as a goodwill gesture to facilitate resolution at the governmental level, India suspended construction on 2 October 1987 even though no provision of the Treaty obligated it to do so. The

suspension was initially for three months. Following two rounds of Secretary-level talks, India agreed to an additional three-month suspension and subsequently granted two one-month extensions of the work suspension through June 2, 1988. After five rounds of negotiations, India acceded to Pakistan's request for an indefinite suspension pending an amicable settlement. As always, India demonstrated its commitment to the spirit of goodwill and friendship that undergirds the Treaty and made a concession not mandated by the Treaty.

Pakistan's conduct reveals a consistent purpose: not to resolve, but to prolong and to defeat through delay. The project has remained suspended ever since, a deliberate outcome that serves Pakistan's strategic interest in keeping Kashmir's water resources infrastructure perpetually incomplete.

## PART II — THE COST OF ASYMMETRY AND THE CASE FOR COMPLETION

**As always, India demonstrated its commitment to the spirit of goodwill and friendship that undergirds the Treaty and made a concession not mandated by the Treaty.**

### THE NAVIGATIONAL AND FISHERIES TOLL

The consequences of the Tulbul suspension were tangible and immediate. Without the project, the Jhelum remains a seasonal waterway. The timber trade, which once moved substantially by water, has migrated to roads, raising freight costs and accelerating highway wear. Local boatmen who once supplemented agricultural incomes through cargo and passenger services have lost that livelihood entirely.

The fisheries toll is equally grave. Wular Lake sustains one of South Asia's most significant inland fisheries, its ecological health directly tied to regulated inflow and outflow. Without that regulation, post-monsoon discharge drains the lake precipitously, leaving water depths far below what optimal fish production requires. Annual fish output has collapsed from over 10,500 tonnes to barely 1,500 tonnes; lotus harvests have similarly declined. Tens of thousands of fishing families across Bandipora and Baramulla districts have lost their primary livelihoods, a loss that ripples outward, suppressing community investment in tourism infrastructure such as boardwalks and vantage points, and stalling broader economic growth across north Kashmir.

### TOURISM

Unregulated winter water levels, which become too shallow between October and February, have made river navigation unreliable, effectively killing the revival of scenic boat tourism along the Jhelum between Srinagar and Wular, a historic corridor whose natural beauty rivals the celebrated waterways of Europe. Wular Lake itself, once central to Kashmir's ecotourism offer, has shrunk from over 200 sq km historically to roughly 80 sq km today under the combined pressure of siltation, weed proliferation, and encroachment, which otherwise could have been moderated by regulated hydrology. Kayaking on the upper Jhelum reaches near Verinag has been similarly curtailed. The economic potential of this corridor, including birdwatching, heritage boat tours, and adventure

sports, remains locked and unrealised.

## THE ASYMMETRY OF COSTS

The deeper inequity lies in who bears the cost of the stalemate. The commissioning of the Mangla Dam downstream altered the natural hydrological and ecological dynamics of the Jhelum system. Pakistan has no navigational, fisheries, or livelihood interest in the Jhelum at the reach downstream of Wular; its objections are theoretical and strategic. Indian technical experts have consistently argued and shown that the impoundment is minimal and the project falls squarely within Treaty limits. Yet, Pakistan has refused to budge. India is made to pay a totally avoidable price through stunted infrastructure and forgone opportunity. A valley whose primary economic assets are its landscapes, waterways, and natural abundance has been denied the basic water management tools those assets require. Had the Tulbul Project been completed, it would have cost a fraction of what has since been spent on road infrastructure built to compensate for the loss of navigable waterways. The Dal Lake restoration programme alone has absorbed thousands of crores over three decades with limited success, partly because the hydrological levers that would make restoration durable remain out of reach.

**Indian technical experts have consistently argued and shown that the impoundment is minimal and the project falls squarely within Treaty limits. Yet, Pakistan has refused to budge. India is made to pay a totally avoidable price through stunted infrastructure and forgone opportunity.**

## THE CASE FOR REVIVAL

The Tulbul suspension stands as the most brazen instance of Pakistan's systematic misuse of the Indus Waters Treaty to obstruct legitimate Indian development. For nearly four decades, Pakistan has exploited this unresolved matter as a diplomatic instrument by blocking Treaty mandated negotiations, conflating the issue with the broader Jammu & Kashmir issue and ensuring that vital infrastructure for a landlocked, economically marginal region remains permanently frozen. The case for completing the project has not weakened with time but grown stronger. Completion would restore year-round navigability along the Jhelum, revitalise agriculture and horticulture transport, stimulate water-based tourism, and deliver meaningful flood moderation for vulnerable towns like Sopore. Regulated flows would also firm up downstream hydroelectric output.

The Navigation Project at Wular's outlet was conceived as a modest structure to meet genuine and addressable needs. The Tulbul case stands as a clear illustration of why India's decision to keep the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance was a measured correction.

# WHO OWNS KASHMIR'S WATER?

*by* **Sohail Bhat**

**The rivers of Kashmir have always been more than scenery. They have carried people, shaped settlements, fed fields, powered machines and remained at the centre of one of South Asia's enduring conflicts. As the old arrangements around water enter uncertain territory, a more immediate question is emerging inside Kashmir itself: who benefits from the water that flows through it?**

There are places in Kashmir where water is so abundant that it seems impossible to imagine anyone going without it.

A stream comes down from a mountain and disappears beneath a village bridge. Another runs through an orchard before joining a larger river. In the higher reaches, snow gathers through the winter and waits for spring. Springs emerge from rock. Glaciers feed narrow valleys. The Jhelum gathers water from tributaries before carrying it towards the western horizon. The Chenab cuts through some of the most difficult terrain in the region, gathering force as it travels through the mountains.

From a distance, this looks like abundance without an argument. But Kashmir has never been simply a land of abundant water. Water here has always been about where it is, when it arrives, who can reach it, what can be built around it, who gets the electricity generated from it and who bears the consequences when it becomes too much or too little.

The contradiction is becoming harder to ignore. A region with enormous rivers can have villages worrying about drinking water. A valley crossed by the Jhelum can watch its river rise towards its banks during a cloudburst and still worry about the condition of its wetlands and flood channels. A mountain district can produce electricity from a river that seems to belong naturally to the landscape while local communities continue to debate what they receive in return.

And now the question has acquired a much larger strategic dimension.

And now the question has acquired a much larger strategic dimension.

The Indus Waters Treaty, signed by India and Pakistan in 1960, divided the waters of the Indus river system between the two countries. The eastern rivers, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej, were allocated for India's unrestricted use subject to the treaty's provisions. The western rivers, Indus, Jhelum and Chenab, were assigned primarily to Pakistan, while India retained specified rights for domestic use, agriculture and hydroelectric generation.

**A valley crossed by the Jhelum can watch its river rise towards its banks during a cloudburst and still worry about the condition of its wetlands and flood channels.**

For more than six decades, this arrangement became one of the fixed points of the India Pakistan relationship. It survived wars, diplomatic breakdowns and periods when almost every other channel of communication had become difficult.

That arrangement, however, changed dramatically in 2025, when Government of India announced that the treaty would be held in abeyance. The decision came after the Pahalgam attack and was presented by New Delhi as part of its response to cross border terrorism. Pakistan argued that the treaty contained no provision for unilateral suspension. The arguments between the two countries are familiar. What is less often asked is what all this means for Kashmir.

Not Pakistan. Not New Delhi. Kashmir.

Because the rivers do not exist on maps as lines separating two countries. They rise, gather, descend and disappear through landscapes where people live. They pass farms, villages and towns. They enter turbines. They flood roads. They feed wetlands. They carry silt. They sustain orchards. They are part of the geography of everyday life.

The question therefore cannot stop at who gets the water downstream. There is another question beneath it.

**Who owns the value of the water while it is still in Kashmir?**

## THE RIVER THAT REFUSES TO BE ORDINARY

The Jhelum begins at Verinag and gathers strength as it moves through the Valley. Several important tributaries join it before it reaches Srinagar, including the

Lidder, Vishow and Rambiara. The river then continues westwards, eventually leaving the Valley and crossing into Pakistan. For Kashmiris, however, the Jhelum is not a basin statistic.

It is a memory. It is the river that children grow up beside. It is the river whose banks become crowded during summer evenings. It is the river that appears in poetry, photographs and family histories. It is also the river that became frightening in September 2014, when a catastrophic flood overwhelmed large parts of the Valley. The flood remains one of the clearest reminders that water does not recognise the categories humans impose upon it. A river can be a resource one day and a threat the next.

The Central Water Commission's assessment of the 2014 disaster found that the flood peak in the Jhelum at Sangam was around 2,500 cubic metres per second and around 3,200 cubic metres per second at Srinagar. The estimated safe carrying capacity between Sangam and Srinagar was about 900 cubic metres per second.

**It is a memory. It is the river that children grow up beside. It is the river whose banks become crowded during summer evenings. It is the river that appears in poetry, photographs and family histories. It is also the river that became frightening in September 2014, when a catastrophic flood overwhelmed large parts of the Valley.**

The difference was enormous. But the numbers tell only part of the story.

Natural flood detention areas had gradually been occupied by development. Wetlands and waterways had suffered from encroachment and siltation. The landscape that once helped absorb excess water had been weakened. This is where Kashmir's water story becomes uncomfortable.

The argument is often presented as though the only problem is how much water exists.

In reality, the more difficult question is whether Kashmir has protected the places where water is supposed to go. A river cannot be managed only by building structures around it.

A wetland is infrastructure. A flood channel is infrastructure. A spring is infrastructure.

A forested catchment is infrastructure. These things do not always appear in project reports with the same visibility as a power station or a barrage, but when they disappear,

the consequences become visible very quickly.

## ABUNDANCE THAT DOES NOT ALWAYS REACH THE TAP

Ask an ordinary household about water and the conversation can move in a completely different direction. The geopolitical debate may be about billions of cubic metres and the rights of upper and lower riparian's. A family may simply want water to arrive at the tap.

A recent study of water resources in Jammu and Kashmir found considerable variation in water availability and quality across different areas. The study reported seasonal variation as a major cause of scarcity and found that many respondents experienced significant time costs in collecting water. It also recorded concerns about groundwater levels and water quality.

That is an important distinction. Water abundance at the scale of a river basin does not automatically mean water security at the household level. The two can exist side by side.

This distinction is likely to become even more important as towns expand and tourism puts additional pressure on local water systems.

A mountain spring may have been enough for a small settlement for generations. It may not be enough for a much larger settlement, particularly when the spring's recharge pattern changes or the surrounding land is altered. A stream can continue flowing while the quality of its water deteriorates.

A river can carry enormous volumes downstream while a village nearby depends on a tanker.

The question is therefore not merely how much water Kashmir has.

It is how much water Kashmir can reliably store, clean, distributes and use without destroying the systems that produce it. That is a much harder problem.

**The study reported seasonal variation as a major cause of scarcity and found that many respondents experienced significant time costs in collecting water.**

And it is a problem that cannot be solved by international diplomacy alone.

## THE POWER HIDDEN INSIDE THE RIVER

There is another way in which Kashmir's water becomes valuable.

It can be turned into electricity. This is where the politics of water becomes inseparable from the politics of development. The steep gradients of the Himalayan rivers create enormous potential for hydropower. The Chenab and Jhelum systems in particular have become central to the region's power infrastructure.

Government figures presented in Parliament in December 2025 listed 3,360 megawatts of commissioned hydroelectric capacity in Jammu and Kashmir. A further 3,051.5 megawatts was listed as under construction, with another 2,449 megawatts under planning.

Those numbers are large enough to change the way a region thinks about its rivers.

A river stops being simply a river.

It becomes an energy asset.

It becomes a source of revenue.

It becomes a national infrastructure project.

It becomes part of a strategic

conversation with Pakistan.

It becomes a subject for engineers, bureaucrats, environmentalists, local politicians and communities.

And somewhere beneath all these descriptions sits the person living beside the river.

What does that person receive? That question deserves more attention than it has received.

For decades, the debate over hydropower in Kashmir has often been framed around two competing claims.

One side argues that Kashmir possesses enormous untapped energy potential and that the region cannot afford to leave it unused.

The other points to displacement, environmental costs, altered river systems, construction impacts and the limited local economic benefits that communities sometimes feel they receive from large projects.

Both arguments contain part of the truth. The challenge is to move beyond them.

A hydropower project should not be judged only by the megawatts it produces.

Nor should it be judged only by the disruption caused during construction.

The real question is whether the economic model surrounding the river works for the people who live beside it.

## THE CHENAB QUESTION

The Chenab presents perhaps the clearest example of the choices now confronting Kashmir.

The river enters Jammu and Kashmir through the mountainous Paddar region before passing through Kishtwar and continuing towards the plains. The Central Water Commission describes the Chenab as receiving the Marusudar, its largest tributary in the Jammu and Kashmir reach, near Bhandarkot. This is not gentle geography. It is a landscape of steep mountains, narrow valleys and powerful water. It is also a landscape increasingly covered by major energy projects.

**The other points to displacement, environmental costs, altered river systems, construction impacts and the limited local economic benefits that communities sometimes feel they receive from large projects.**

Salal is already operating.

Baglihar is operating. Ratle is under construction. Kiru and Kwar are also under construction.

Sawalkote remains an important project in the planning pipeline. The government's own data shows the scale of the transformation underway. The logic is straightforward.

Water falls. Turbines turn. Electricity is produced.

But rivers do not behave like machines.

They carry sediment. Their flow changes with the seasons. Their temperature changes. Their ecological systems depend on particular patterns of flow. Fish move through them. Villages depend on their banks. Roads and bridges cross them. Landslides alter their channels.

The challenge is therefore not whether hydropower should exist.

It is whether development can proceed without treating the river as an empty space waiting to be occupied by infrastructure. That distinction matters.

Because once a river has been heavily engineered, restoring what was lost can be far more difficult than preventing the loss in the first place.

## A TREATY WRITTEN IN THE LANGUAGE OF ENGINEERING

The Indus Waters Treaty was itself an exercise in turning a complicated geography into a manageable system.

Its language is technical.

Its architecture is based on rivers, uses, measurements, storage, agricultural requirements and engineering designs.

Under the treaty, India was permitted to generate hydroelectric power on the western rivers subject to

specified conditions.

For decades, projects such as Baglihar and Kishanganga became part of larger arguments over the interpretation of those conditions.

From the Indian perspective, the treaty constrained the ability to fully exploit the potential of rivers flowing through Jammu and Kashmir.

From the Pakistani perspective, the treaty provided predictability over rivers vital to its agriculture, economy and population.

The question is what happens when strategic calculations begin to dominate the conversation about a resource that also has to serve local communities?

The answer cannot be found entirely in Delhi or Islamabad.

It has to be found in the valleys through which the rivers actually flow.

## THE POLITICS OF STORAGE

One of the most important consequences of the changed water environment could be a renewed interest in storage and regulation.

For years, projects such as the Tulbul Navigation Project have remained entangled in the treaty dispute. The proposal, associated with regulation of the Jhelum near Wular Lake, has been discussed for decades. Its history stretches back to the 1980s and became complicated by objections from Pakistan under the treaty framework.

The Chenab has its own set of proposals and projects.

Storage can have obvious benefits.

It can help manage water.

It can support electricity generation.

It can provide greater flexibility during periods of high and low flows.

But storage also changes rivers.

A reservoir does not simply hold water. It alters the relationship between a river and the landscape around it.

Sediment settles.

Habitats change.

Land is submerged.

People may have to move.

Downstream flows can change.

The economic value of the river can increase while its ecological value changes in ways that are harder to calculate.

This is why the next phase of Kashmir's water policy needs something more sophisticated than the old argument between development and environmental protection.

The real challenge is to calculate the full value of a river.

Not just its electricity.

Not just its irrigation.

Not just its strategic significance.

Its ecological value.

Its role in tourism.

Its role in flood management.

Its importance to agriculture.

Its importance to drinking water.

Its cultural significance.

And the cost of losing those things.

**For years, projects such as the Tulbul Navigation Project have remained entangled in the treaty dispute. The proposal, associated with regulation of the Jhelum near Wular Lake, has been discussed for decades. Its history stretches back to the 1980s and became complicated by objections from Pakistan under the treaty framework.**

## THE WATER THAT BECOMES ELECTRICITY

There is a peculiar irony in Kashmir's power story.

The region has enormous hydropower potential, yet electricity supply has historically remained a source of public frustration.

The answer is not as simple as saying that every megawatt generated in Kashmir should remain in Kashmir.

Electricity is part of a larger grid.

Projects require enormous capital.

Transmission systems have to be built.

Maintenance is expensive.

The region benefits from national investment. But the argument about local benefit should not disappear simply because the electricity enters a national grid.

A fairer question would be whether communities in project areas receive a sufficiently visible share of the economic value created around them. That could include local employment.

It could include roads and health facilities.

It could include education.

It could include reliable electricity.

It could include a predictable share of revenue.

It could include serious rehabilitation where land or livelihoods are affected.

It could also mean giving local communities a meaningful voice before a project becomes inevitable.

This is not merely a question of compensation. Compensation is paid once. A river generates value for decades. The relationship between the project and the community therefore has to last as long as the project does.

## THE WATER BENEATH THE WATER

There is another part of Kashmir's water story that rarely receives the attention given to the great rivers.

Groundwater.

Springs.

Small streams.

Traditional water systems.

These are the less visible foundations of everyday water security.

A large river may be impressive, but most households do not collect drinking water directly from the Jhelum or Chenab.

They depend on smaller systems.

And those systems are vulnerable.

A spring can weaken because of changes in recharge.

A stream can become polluted.

A wetland can be filled.

A catchment can be disturbed.

An urban area can expand over natural drainage.

Once these changes accumulate, the river becomes the visible symptom of a problem that began much higher up the landscape.

This is why water policy cannot be reduced to dams.

It has to begin in the catchment.

Protect the forest and you protect infiltration.

Protect the wetland and you create space for excess water.

Protect the spring and you preserve a local water source.

Protect the floodplain and you reduce future damage.

The cheapest water infrastructure is sometimes the landscape that already exists.

## KASHMIR'S TWO WATER SEASONS

The old rhythm of water in Kashmir is changing. For generations, people understood water through seasons. Winter meant snow. Spring brought melting. Summer brought irrigation and tourism. Autumn brought a gradual withdrawal of water. The system was never perfectly predictable, but people knew its broad rhythm. That certainty is becoming less reliable.

Rain can arrive intensely. Snow

patterns can shift. Warm periods can arrive earlier.

Extreme rainfall can overwhelm drainage systems.

Periods of scarcity can follow periods of abundance.

Recent research on water resources in Jammu and Kashmir reflects this uncertainty, identifying seasonal variation as a major source of water stress and documenting significant variation in groundwater levels and water quality across locations. This creates a strange future.

Kashmir may experience more water at the wrong time and less water at the right time.

That is perhaps the central water challenge of the coming decades.

The question will not simply be how to find more water.

**For generations, people understood water through seasons. Winter meant snow. Spring brought melting. Summer brought irrigation and tourism. Autumn brought a gradual withdrawal of water.**

It will be how to hold on to water when it arrives violently and make it available when it is needed. That requires a different kind of infrastructure. It requires storage. But it also requires wetlands. Forests. Recharge zones. Better drainage. Better forecasting. Better local systems.

And a willingness to stop building over the very spaces that protect settlements from water.

## WHO OWNS THE WATER?

Perhaps the title of this story is deliberately provocative.

Because the obvious answer is that nobody owns a river in the simple sense.

Governments regulate it. Countries negotiate over it. Communities depend on it. Companies build projects around it. Farmers cultivate with it. Cities consume it. Nature itself determines much of its movement. The real issue is therefore not ownership. It is control and benefit. Who decides where the river is diverted? Who decides which project is built? Who decides what constitutes an acceptable environmental cost? Who receives the revenue? Who bears the risk?

Who gets compensation? Who gets electricity? Who gets drinking water? Who gets a voice?

Those questions become increasingly important as Kashmir enters a new era in water policy.

The end of the old treaty framework does not automatically mean that every constraint has disappeared. Nor does it mean that every project that was previously delayed can suddenly be built. Engineering takes time. Environmental assessment takes time. Finance takes time.

Land acquisition takes time. Communities take time. Rivers certainly do. But the political signal is unmistakable. Water has moved higher on the strategic agenda. The danger is that the larger the strategic argument becomes, the smaller the ordinary Kashmiri can appear within it.

That would be a mistake.

## THE VALLEY BENEATH THE MAP

Imagine a map of the Indus basin. The rivers are lines. The mountains are shaded. The borders are clearly marked. Projects appear as symbols. Dams are dots. Reservoirs are blue shapes.

It is an efficient map. But it does not show the woman waiting for a water tanker.

It does not show the farmer watching a stream become shallow.

It does not show the family whose house flooded because a drainage channel had disappeared.

It does not show the young man who works at a hydropower project but still wonders whether there is a future for his village. It does not show the orchard whose water supply depends on a spring. It does not show the fish that once moved through a river. It does not show the wetland that once absorbed a flood. A water policy built only around maps will miss the most important part of the story. Kashmir is entering a period in which its rivers may become more valuable than ever. More electricity will be sought. More infrastructure will be proposed. More water will be required by expanding towns. More tourists will arrive. Agriculture will face new pressures.

**A water policy built only around maps will miss the most important part of the story. Kashmir is entering a period in which its rivers may become more valuable than ever.**

Climate uncertainty will increase. And the strategic importance of the western rivers will remain high. The temptation will be to see this as an opportunity to finally unlock Kashmir's water wealth. here is opportunity here. There is also danger. The mistake would be to believe that unlocking a river simply means building on it. The real opportunity is to build an economy around water without exhausting the landscape that produces it.

That means treating water as a public asset rather than merely a commodity.

It means measuring success not only in megawatts and cubic metres but also in reliable drinking water, protected wetlands, healthier rivers and stronger local economies.

It means asking whether communities living beside major

projects are genuinely better off.

It means ensuring that environmental costs are counted before construction rather than explained afterwards.

And it means accepting something that Kashmir's geography has been saying for centuries.

Water is never just water.

It is power.

It is food.

It is energy.

It is security.

It is memory.

It is livelihood.

And increasingly, it is politics.

## THE QUESTION KASHMIR SHOULD ASK NOW

For decades, the central water question was framed outside Kashmir.

How much water should India use?

How much should Pakistan receive?

What does the treaty permit?

What does it restrict?

What happens to the western rivers?

Those questions will remain.

But they should no longer be the only questions.

Kashmir needs its own water conversation.

It should begin with a deceptively simple question.

## WHAT DOES KASHMIR WANT FROM ITS RIVERS?

Does it want electricity?

Certainly.

Does it want irrigation?

Certainly.

Does it want irrigation?

Of course.

Does it want drinking water for every household?

It should.

Does it want flood protection?

It must.

Does it want tourism?

Yes, but not at the cost of destroying the rivers that attract visitors.

Does it want industrial development?

It may.

Does it want its young people to benefit economically from the resources beneath and around them?

It should.

Does it want its wetlands, springs and forests protected?

It cannot afford otherwise.

And does it want a voice in decisions about the rivers that shape its future?

That should not be an unreasonable demand.

The next chapter of Kashmir's water story will therefore not be decided only by what happens between India and Pakistan.

It will also be decided in government offices, at project sites in Kishtwar and Reasi, in villages along the Chenab, in settlements around the Jhelum, in the wetlands of the Valley and in households where water arrives through a pipe or does not arrive at all.

The strategic map will continue to show the rivers flowing west.

But the more important map may be the one drawn inside Kashmir itself.

It will show where water is available.

Where it is disappearing.

Where it is being stored.

Where it is being consumed.

Where it is generating wealth.

And where people are still waiting for their share.

That is the question that should define the next phase.

Not simply who owns Kashmir's water.

But **who benefits from it, who pays for it, who protects it and who gets to decide its future.**

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# THE PROTESTS THAT WON'T GO AWAY

## PAKISTAN-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICAL MANAGEMENT

*by* **Rafi Ahmad Mir**

**The resurgence of protests in Pakistan-administered Kashmir has become a recurring, almost permanent feature of its political landscape. Demonstrations may subside after negotiations, government concessions, arrests or changes in political leadership, but they have repeatedly returned, often around new grievances and with wider demands. What began as sporadic agitation over prices and basic services has gradually evolved into a sustained expression of public dissatisfaction with governance itself, making the unrest increasingly difficult for Islamabad to treat as a temporary law-and-order problem.**

That transformation is important. A government can negotiate over the price of electricity; it is considerably harder to negotiate over who should exercise political authority.

The latest phase of unrest has coincided with elections to the territory's legislative assembly, producing an irony that is difficult to ignore. An election that should have provided an institutional outlet for discontent instead became part of the dispute itself. The JAAC called for a boycott, while the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf also stayed out of the contest, citing concerns over the electoral process. Violence and protests forced polling to be conducted in stages, while communications restrictions remained in place for an extended period. The result is a territory in which the ballot box and the street have, at least temporarily, become competing arenas of political expression.

The roots of the movement lie in issues that are remarkably ordinary. In 2023, the cost of electricity and subsidized flour brought people into the streets because these were grievances felt directly in households and markets. The protests gathered sufficient momentum that, after violent confrontations in 2024, the government agreed to a package of concessions.

**That settlement should have brought the agitation to an end. Instead, it taught the movement something important: collective pressure could force Islamabad and the regional government to respond.**

That settlement should have brought the agitation to an end. Instead, it taught the movement something important: collective pressure could force Islamabad and the regional government to respond. The demands subsequently widened.

This is where the protest ceased to be merely an economic

campaign. The question of the 12 refugee seats became especially contentious because it goes to the heart of representation in a territory whose constitutional position is already unusual. Supporters of the existing arrangement argue that the seats reflect the unresolved Kashmir dispute and represent people displaced from their homes. The protesters argue that a legislature governing Pakistan-administered Kashmir should principally reflect those who actually live there.

Behind the argument over seats is a larger sentiment: that decisions concerning the territory are too often shaped elsewhere, while the people living there bear the consequences.

The electricity dispute exposed dissatisfaction with economic governance. The representation dispute has exposed dissatisfaction with political governance. Together, they have given the movement a considerably longer life than a conventional protest over prices would ordinarily have had.

## WHEN A CIVIL PROTEST BECOMES A SECURITY PROBLEM

**Leaders become suspects, demonstrations become threats and political grievances are increasingly addressed through policing rather than politics.**

The government's response has become progressively harder as the movement has expanded. In June 2026, the regional authorities banned the JAAC and accused elements associated with the agitation of threatening public order. Officials have also alleged that armed elements became involved in some of the later confrontations, while the movement has rejected attempts to portray its campaign as anything other than a political and economic struggle. But there is a danger in allowing a political dispute to acquire the vocabulary of an internal security operation. Once protesters are viewed primarily through the prism of public order, the space for negotiation narrows. Leaders become suspects, demonstrations become threats and political grievances are increasingly addressed through policing rather than politics. That may restore order temporarily. It does not necessarily remove the reason people came into the streets.

The distinction is particularly important in a place where political alienation can have consequences beyond the immediate dispute. A government may succeed in dispersing a demonstration while simultaneously deepening the conviction among sections of the population that their complaints can be heard only when they become disruptive.

The prolonged communications shutdown has become another part of the confrontation. Governments routinely justify internet restrictions during periods of serious unrest on grounds of preventing mobilization, rumors and violence. Those concerns cannot simply be dismissed. But a shutdown that continues for weeks also changes the political

environment in which the dispute is taking place.

Families find it harder to communicate. Businesses suffer. Independent reporting becomes more difficult. Accounts of deaths and violence circulate with little opportunity for immediate verification. Each side is left to present its own version of events, while the public has fewer means of establishing what actually happened. By early August, reports described an internet shutdown in Pakistan-administered Kashmir that had continued intermittently for more than 50 days. At that point, the blackout is no longer merely a technical instrument of crowd control. It becomes part of the public experience of governance. For residents already convinced that Islamabad is distant from their concerns, the restriction can reinforce precisely that perception.

## RAWALAKOT AND THE DEPTH OF THE MOVEMENT

The geography of the protests also matters. Muzaffarabad naturally attracts the greatest attention because it is the capital, but some of the strongest mobilization has come from the Poonch division and the Rawalakot area. Clashes there have been particularly serious, with civilian and security-force deaths reported and competing accounts emerging over who was responsible for the escalation. The authorities subsequently deployed additional paramilitary forces. This makes it increasingly difficult to characterize the agitation as the work of a small group of political activists in the capital. The movement has developed a social base.

**Clashes there have been particularly serious, with civilian and security-force deaths reported and competing accounts emerging over who was responsible for the escalation.**

That is precisely what makes it difficult to suppress. Organizations can be banned and leaders detained, but a grievance embedded across towns, markets and communities does not disappear simply because its most visible representatives are removed. The government therefore faces a familiar problem: it can control the immediate manifestation of dissent much more easily than it can eliminate the sentiment behind it.

## AN ELECTION CANNOT SETTLE A QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY BY ITSELF

The elections have brought this contradiction into sharper focus. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz has performed strongly in the early phases of polling, while the Pakistan Peoples Party has also secured representation. Reuters reported that PML-N was on course for a majority as polling progressed, although the political atmosphere remained tense. A government emerging from an election will have formal authority. Whether it possesses sufficient public legitimacy to end the confrontation is a different matter.

The JAAC's boycott means that

one of the most significant forces shaping the political climate has deliberately remained outside the electoral contest. Its argument is not simply that a particular party should win or lose; it challenges aspects of the political structure itself.

This is where the issue of the refugee seats becomes particularly significant. If a substantial section of the population believes that the composition of the legislature does not adequately reflect those living in the territory, an election alone cannot resolve the disagreement. It can produce representatives, but it cannot automatically settle the argument over representation.

## ISLAMABAD'S DIFFICULT CHOICE

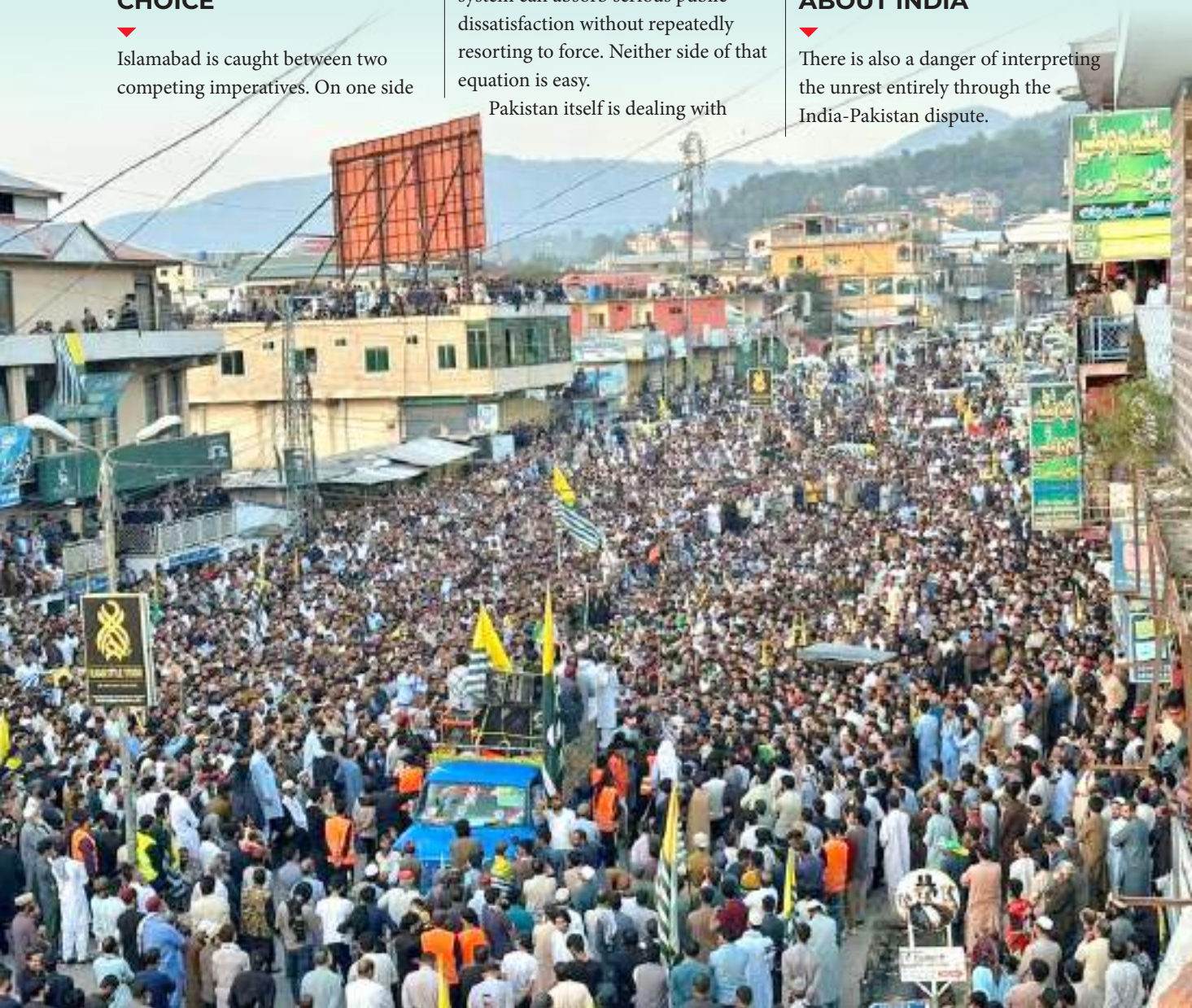
Islamabad is caught between two competing imperatives. On one side is the need to maintain order in a territory that Islamabad regards as strategically and politically sensitive. On the other is the need to demonstrate that the political system can absorb serious public dissatisfaction without repeatedly resorting to force. Neither side of that equation is easy.

**Large financial concessions are difficult to sustain, particularly when the underlying economic problems are not unique to Pakistan-administered Kashmir.**

Pakistan itself is dealing with economic constraints, political polarization and serious internal security pressures. Large financial concessions are difficult to sustain, particularly when the underlying economic problems are not unique to Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Yet refusing to address them risks turning manageable economic grievances into a broader indictment of governance. This may explain why the protest has proved so persistent. People are no longer asking only whether electricity can be made cheaper. They are asking why they have to shut down roads and markets before the government responds. That is a political question disguised, at first, as an economic one.

## NOT EVERY PROTEST IS ABOUT INDIA

There is also a danger of interpreting the unrest entirely through the India-Pakistan dispute.



The wider Kashmir question is obviously inseparable from the territory's political structure. The refugee seats, the constitutional arrangement and Islamabad's relationship with the territory all have their roots in the larger conflict. But the present agitation should not be reduced to a contest between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Most of the grievances that have sustained it are local and immediate: electricity, flour, employment, corruption, public services and political representation. A person protesting the cost of electricity is not necessarily making a geopolitical statement. A resident objecting to the composition of the regional assembly is not necessarily articulating a position on territory's status. That is precisely why the movement has acquired resonance. It is not dependent on a single ideological demand. It is built around the experience of governance.

The most serious problem for Islamabad may not be the present protest itself but the cycle that has developed around it. A grievance emerges. Demonstrations grow. The authorities respond with restrictions or force. Negotiations follow. Some concessions are offered. The streets become quiet. The underlying dissatisfaction remains. Another issue eventually provides the next point of mobilization. The pattern has already repeated several times. If it continues, the territory risks reaching a point where protest becomes the principal mechanism through which citizens negotiate with the government. That would be damaging for both sides.

*A government that responds only after streets are blocked teaches people that disruption works. A protest movement that expects every demand to be settled through pressure gradually loses the incentive to compromise. The middle ground then disappears.*

The immediate political question is what the new government does

once the electoral process is complete. It can treat the unrest as a law-and-order problem and attempt to restore normal administration through stronger enforcement. It can negotiate selectively over economic demands. Or it can recognize that the movement has exposed a deeper problem and reopen the questions of representation and governance that have become increasingly difficult to avoid.

Islamabad, it seems, considers the last option very risky. It's response so for to the protests gives us a fair idea that a serious discussion about the 12 refugee seats, for example, would inevitably raise questions about the wider political structure of Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the federal government's influence over it. But avoiding the issue carries much greater risk: it leaves one of the movement's most powerful grievances intact.

The government may therefore find that the easiest questions are no longer the most important ones. Reducing electricity prices is administratively manageable. Restoring trust is not.

The streets may eventually empty. The internet will return. Markets will reopen. The new assembly will begin its work and political parties will settle into the familiar business of government. But it would be premature to assume that the movement has therefore failed.

Its most consequential achievement may already have been to alter the terms of the political conversation in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

Questions that were once discussed largely within political parties or government offices are now being debated in markets, universities, professional groups and public gatherings. The issue is no longer simply whether Islamabad will provide cheaper electricity or additional subsidies. It is whether the existing system of governance is sufficiently responsive to the people who live under it. That is a harder question to silence. Pakistan-administered Kashmir does not appear to be facing an organized separatist uprising. The protest, therefore, may quieten. The argument behind it will remain. And unless the political system finds a credible way of absorbing that argument, the next confrontation may not require a new movement at all. It may only require a new grievance.

(***Rafi Ahmar Mir*** *is a prominent Kashmiri political leader who has been active in Kashmir politics since 1987. He represented the Pahalgam Assembly constituency for two terms and also served as a nominated member of the former Legislative Council, the upper house of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir legislature)*

# ECONOMICS OF JOBLESS GROWTH IN INDIA

*by* **Dr Mehraj Ud Din Shah**

**"India's economic growth has been impressive, but growth alone is insufficient if it fails to create productive employment. The persistence of youth unemployment, informal work, and skill deficiencies indicates that the country's growth model has become less employment-intensive. To fully realize its demographic dividend, India must shift from GDP-led growth to employment-led and productivity-enhancing growth".**

India is seen as a star economy in the world. It is the fastest-growing economy set to touch $ 5 trillion by 2030. The GDP growth of the country is pegged at around 6% to 7% over the decade. Nevertheless, India at present is in a peculiar economic condition. The country is facing a grave economic challenge of jobless growth. Satisfactory GDP growth is marginally increasing employment opportunities. Consequently, the gap between job demands and supply is widening. Although the overall unemployment rate in the country is not more than 3.1% in 2025. However, the youth unemployment rates are significantly higher, 10.2% in 2023-24, hinting at a complex matrix of joblessness among the youth. The joblessness among the youth is overwhelming in the age group of 15-29 years and indicates that precious and productive resources remain unutilized and untapped. This situation appears more complicated when data show that urban unemployment is 14.7% compared to rural unemployment at 8%. Understandably, it is not an exclusive problem of unemployment. It is much more than this. It is underemployment, informal employment, low productivity jobs, educated unemployment, skill mismatch, and declining labour intensity of production. The existing research indicates that employment elasticity has fallen considerably since the economic reforms of the 1990s, indicating that each percentage point of GDP growth now creates fewer jobs than before.

**The sector has 45% and 16% share in employment generation and GDP growth, respectively, in 2026.**

While looking at the sectoral contribution to GDP and employment generation, agriculture is still a dominant sector in India and marshals other sectors in terms of employment generation. However, it lags significantly behind in GDP growth. The sector has 45% and 16% share in employment generation and GDP growth, respectively, in 2026. This imbalance reflects extremely low labour productivity, mainly driven by disguised unemployment, fragmented landholdings, seasonal employment, and low wages. The scenario demands a reorientation of agriculture-centric policy discourse, pushing cultivation of innovative research-driven high-yield crops, inducing advanced Agri-tech operations, mechanisms in the farm sector, and other supporting infrastructure in the sector.

Nonetheless, for more than a decade, the manufacturing sector has been sluggish and contributes not more than 18% to the GDP growth of the country in 2026. This

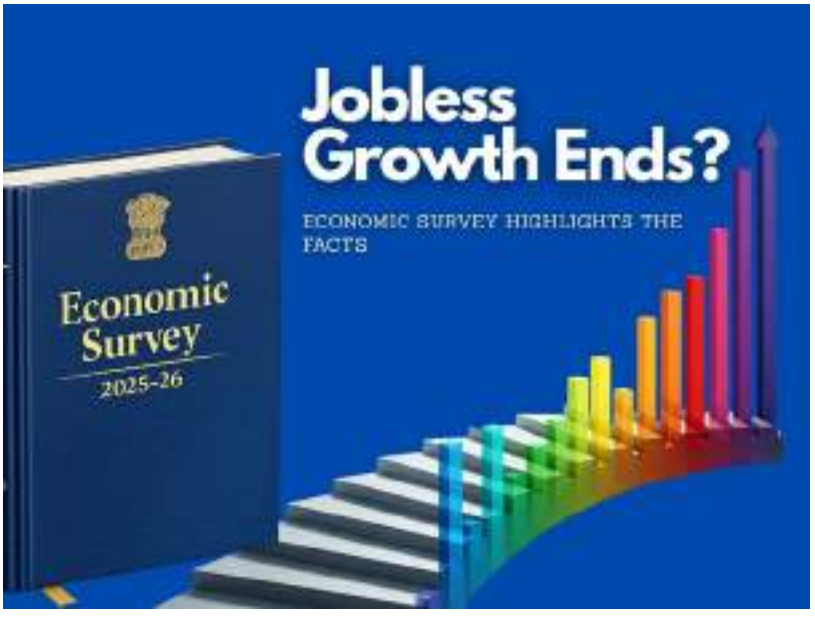
sector is also significantly behind in the employment generation when compared to the agriculture sector. It contributes not more than 8% employment opportunities, despite the increased industrial output. Understandably, the manufacturing sector is largely absorbing labour, that is leaving agriculture. However, industries like textiles, leather, footwear, food processing, and construction contribute overwhelmingly both to the GDP growth and employment generation. Factually, the added automation of the production process reduced labour demand despite increased industrial output. These scenarios are visible across many nations, where the new technology has significantly replaced the labour-driven business models, pushed retrenchment of labour, and halted the growth of employment. The labour-intensive industry in India would have been on a different pedestal, had the plausible measure been pushed for execution on opportune time. Moreover, India has not replicated the labour-intensive manufacturing success seen in East Asian economies, such as China, where labour-intensive industries significantly contribute to employment generation and GDP growth. Over the last decade or so,

**Industries like textiles, leather, footwear, food processing, and construction contribute overwhelmingly both to the GDP growth and employment generation.**

many labour-intensive industries such as textiles, garments, footwear, toys, furniture, and consumer electronics assembly have grown rapidly because of an abundant workforce, good infrastructure, and export-oriented policies.

Whereas the service sector, being a dominant sector, significantly contributes both to GDP growth (55%) and employment generation (30%). Industries like Information Technology (IT), Banking, and Telecommunications enjoy the distinction as catalysts of GDP growth, but seldom generate desirable employment. While the industries include hospitality and tourism, transport, and delivery platforms largely generate large, low-wage jobs, they also contribute to the GDP of the country.

Globally, the jobless growth is seen as a major socio- economic concern. GDP growth is largely technology-driven, and Productivity rises through automation and added technology infusion. The firms produce more output with fewer workers, capital-intensive industries dominate investment, and labour-intensive manufacturing expands slowly. The picture of overstaffing and overcrowding of workplaces is getting overwhelmingly reversed with requisite manpower needs, outsourcing staff engagements, etc. In the Asian continent, along with India, Pakistan, Nepal, Philippines, and Bangladesh are in this trap. In Pakistan, jobless growth is mainly due to low investment, weak industrialization, energy, and infrastructure constraints. In Nepal, Growth has not created enough domestic employment, leading many workers—especially young people—to seek jobs abroad. In the Philippines, the GDP growth is good; however, the industry is not able to create jobs due to skill mismatch. While in Bangladesh, GDP growth is strong, employment generation is weak. The focus of manufacturing is only on garments, private investment is weak, and automation is increasing. Similarly, in the European Union (EU), countries like Denmark, Germany, Finland, Poland, the UK, etc have a whopping unemployment rate due to automation growth. The EU has generally experienced moderate jobless growth, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. Productivity gains and automation reduced demand for low-skilled labour, while employment shifted toward high-skilled services, healthcare, information technology, and knowledge-based sectors. Labour market reforms have helped



some countries in the EU to reduce unemployment. The countries like China, the USA, and Japan are no way better on this front. China has experienced increasing jobless growth as it transitions from labour-intensive manufacturing to automation and high-tech industries. Rising wages, industrial upgrading, and robotics have reduced employment growth in manufacturing. The services sector has absorbed many workers, but employment growth has slowed relative to economic growth. The USA is one of the classic examples of jobless growth. GDP has often grown strongly, but manufacturing employment has declined because of automation and outsourcing. Most new jobs have been created in services, technology, healthcare, and professional sectors, while middle-skill manufacturing jobs have decreased. While Japan's experience differs because of its ageing and shrinking population. Although automation is widespread, labour shortages rather than unemployment are a major concern. Employment levels remain relatively high, but productivity growth is driven by robotics and technology instead of workforce expansion.

**This economic fallout can be reversed by nations, especially India, by developing human resources with skills that meet the needs of industry.**

The economic fallout of the jobless growth includes reduced consumer demand, low savings, low investment, social unrest, migration, rising income inequality, and wasted demographic dividends. This economic fallout can be reversed by nations, especially India, by developing human resources with skills that meet the needs of industry. The major skills that its human resources should hone include Artificial Intelligence, Data Analytics, Robotics, Machine Learning, Advanced Manufacturing, Electronics, Green technologies, in addition to many other technical skills in the domains of electronics and telecommunication, automobile, civil, and mechanical job-related skills. These skills must be mapped with the regular curricula of academics, right from the secondary level, to align education and employability. Although the government of India took several initiatives like Make in India, Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Startup India, Digital India, Production Linked Incentive (PLI), National Manufacturing Mission and MGNREGA (rural employment) to address skills and employment. Nevertheless, these initiatives have expanded training and investment, but stronger links between skilling, industry demand, and quality employment remain a major challenge.

**The author is the Head, Department of Commerce, Central University of Kashmir, Ganderbal*

The latest book " Moral Rupture of Kashmir Society: impact of prolonged conflict by Bashir Assad is scheduled to be released on September 28 at the India International Centre in New Delhi. Readers can order a copy of the book online through platforms like Amazon India or Flipkart.

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Instead of discussing politics, this book focuses on how prolonged conflict changes local society.
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## IDENTITY SHIFT:

It details changes in a once pluralistic culture.

## EROSION OF SOCIAL TRUST:

The book examines how deep-seated ideological division and ongoing political instability have severely weakened interpersonal relationships and fractured community ties.

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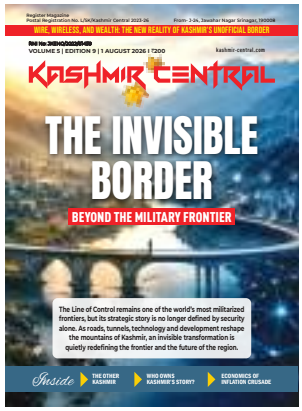


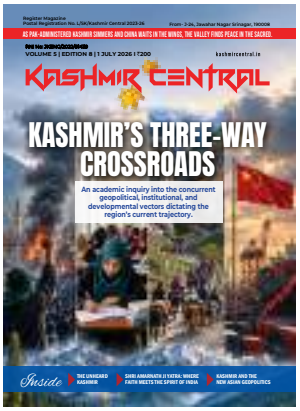


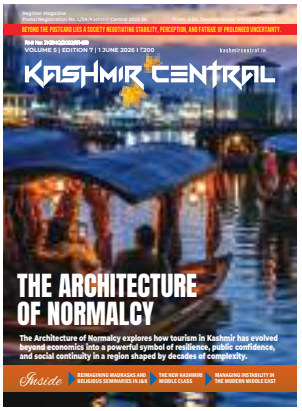


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